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Corbynism changes the centre, but can it convert it?

F. H. Pitts

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27th July 2016

Whatever happens this summer, Jeremy Corbyn leaves a major legacy. Most notable is the long-term leftwards shift in Labour's centre of gravity. The party's right in retreat, Corbyn's challenger Owen Smith campaigns on an almost identical platform, Trident and the EU aside. Smith's pitch is to present it better and add much-needed policy heft. Smith's recruitment of Corbyn's former policy chief as his own indicates a narrowing ideological horizon. The course steered may need a new captain, but politically Corbyn binds Labour left for the foreseeable future. This is a good thing.

But Corbynism has changed things elsewhere too, and in the most unexpected of quarters. Indeed, the Corbyn Effect may win the next general election. The only thing is, under Corbyn, it won't be Labour cracking open the fizz. Margaret Thatcher famously named New Labour her greatest achievement. Corbyn's legacy may transpire to be the caring, sharing 'New Tories'.

New Labour hatched under Thatcher's watch, her hegemonic project remoulding commonsense in the eighties. But the New Tories sprung when Corbyn's back was turned. Labour abandoned the business of being an alternative government. Opportunistically, Tories clothed themselves in the garb Labour shed. Their new One Nation Milibandism could be a potent electoral proposition from the natural party of parliamentary rule. And letting the Tories tack left makes a Labour win less likely when one is sorely needed to turn the big, bad Brexit ship of fools back to land.

Labour's slumber as the Tories stole its clothes should come as no surprise. With some exceptions, the left has struggled, since 2010, to get a handle on what Tory modernisation really represents. Railing against right-wing austerity, it ignored Cameron and Osborne's centrist instincts. The left swung blindly at an imaginary hard-right foe.

Pre-referendum, the latter days of Cameron rule made obvious what they missed. Cameron and Osborne made bold plays for a political centre ground Corbyn reconfigured. The National Living Wage is one example. Osborne could afford to alienate a key constituency- business owners- knowing they had nowhere else to go. Current signs suggest Tories wager much the same today. Crabb created buzz with a Keynesian pitch for leader. May comes bearing centrist homilies and a mainly comprehensive-educated cabinet, primed to decimate Corbyn in any snap contest. A new ICM poll suggests a whopping 16 per cent lead for the Tories.

A crest entirely without a wave

Corbyn has opened political space on the centre and centre left. He has also made it possible to talk about austerity and inequality more freely. But he doesn't have what it takes to make a fair fist of it. Corbynism changes the structure of political opportunities, but it cannot contain them. Some, indeed, accrue to the Tories, who have taken full advantage, launching a landgrab for Labour swing votes.

They will profit only in the absence of a clear Corbyn plan to change the wider political calculus à la Thatcher. But one does not seem forthcoming. Thatcher came to power with serious intellectual backing from policy think-tanks. She wielded it by reshaping the entire political and social terrain. New Labour was the result. Blair, too, came at the crest of a wave of big ideas and a popular groundswell of support.

Corbyn's ascent to the Labour leadership, on the other hand, was a crest entirely without a wave. A fluke victor in a field of also-rans, he rode no surge of public opinion or political revolt. All tip, no iceberg, a limp struggle has since ensued to summon up popular support from nothing.

Corbynism has unleashed changes it lacks the strategic resources to convert into electoral gain. So successful has Corbyn been in bringing political change to Britain, the narrow social basis of his support cannot carry it. The spoils of his success spill instead into the laps of the Tories.

As Matt Bolton suggests in an excellent analysis, Corbynism has become 'as much of a top-down mediated phenomenon as anything under Blair, a simulation of a social movement'. Corbyn's fanbase, morphed into Momentum, does little to reshape the political lay of the land in its image. Things look different from the

doorstep, where Labour oldhands bemoan how thousands of Corbynista sign-ups translate into one or two door-knockers.

Paying lip service to the status of a social movement, Corbynism conceals a crisis of identity. The cult of personality around Corbyn ironically stymies his own ability to succeed. Fixated with their fight against fictional 'Blairites', Corbyn's supporters forget that convincing other people is the only way he'll survive. In this way, the inherent instability of his leadership saps energy from the movement that brought him to power. Petition-signing substitutes for canvassing or street-level activity, when a little of the latter would help shore him up.

Labour's leftwards turn under Corbyn creates a lasting historical opportunity

But it seems too late. Momentum's true potential lay in linking up existing social movements with Labour and the trade unions. It could have brought the labour movement into contact with radical experiments in building real alternatives. This would have given practical, concrete form to Corbynism, and, crucially, a life beyond it. Momentum has materialised only with Corbyn's position under threat. But rallies, marches and meetings for the already-converted are not enough.

For an extra-parliamentary grassroots movement ambivalent about electoralism, Corbynism seems obsessed with party leadership. This paradox is neatly addressed in a recent piece by Amy Westwell. The issue illustrates a historical contradiction for the left. Seeking parliamentary strength can undermine building popular support for social change, and vice versa. With some success, Labour has historically worked within these contradictions. This is something Corbynistas seem unable or unwilling to countenance. There are Marxists among them who should know better than to run and hide from contradiction.

For those comfortable with compromise, Labour's leftwards turn under Corbyn creates a lasting historical opportunity. As Bolton suggests, a new leader from the party's soft-left could conceivably sell the same radical platform with greater success. Under the unbreakable logic of these things, Owen Smith is the more 'credible' candidate. But for those wrapped in Corbyn-wool, accommodation demands too sharp a revision of existing beliefs. They persist in projecting a shift within the party outward to the people at large, without the legwork that precedes it.

Corbynism may have altered political positioning, but sadly the realities of its salesmanship remain the same. As leader, Smith could take the best of the last ten months- unarguably McDonnell's economic rethinking- and reach out from the left via a leftwards-listing centre Corbyn helped create. The post-referendum New Tories are eager to remedy the nation of their party's EU recklessness- as David Runciman points out in the LRB, a recklessness itself enabled by the political space Corbyn affords. The Tories need that space now more than ever. Labour must not be so forgiving as to let them own it.